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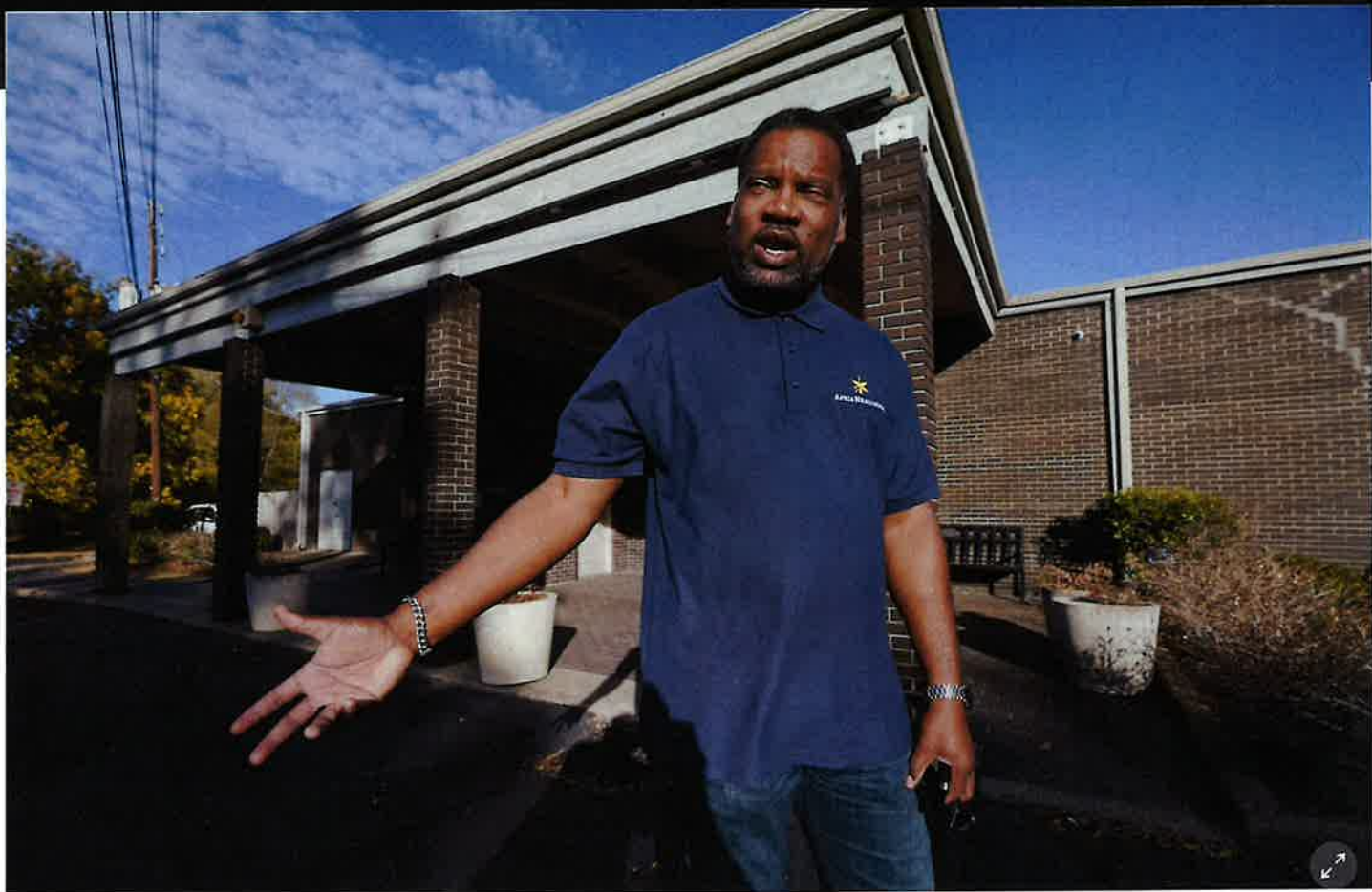
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U.S. NEWS

## Ballot shortages in Mississippi created a problem for democracy on the day of a governor's election



BY EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS, [MICHAEL GOLDBERG](#) AND AYANNA ALEXANDER

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JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — People in Mississippi's largest county are demanding answers about why some polling places ran out of ballots and voters had to wait for them to be replenished on the day the state was deciding its [most competitive governor's race](#) in a generation.

It's unclear how many people left without voting, and activists and local leaders say election officials' failure is shocking, especially in a state where civil rights leaders were beaten or killed in the 1960s and earlier to [secure voting rights for Black residents](#).

"If you can't vote, that's a problem for democracy," said Paloma Wu, a Mississippi Center for Justice attorney who filed one of two lawsuits to keep polling places open later than usual in Hinds County.

EXHIBIT

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Republican Gov. Tate Reeves defeated Democratic challenger Brandon Presley in Mississippi's most expensive gubernatorial race.

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Nearly 40% of Mississippi residents are Black. Presley, who's a state utility regulator and second cousin of rock icon Elvis Presley, [actively courted Black voters](#) and needed strong support in majority-Black Hinds County, which is home to the capital city of Jackson.

Otis Wells, 51, said he, his wife and their son stood in a long line at a polling place in an old public library in the Jackson suburb of Clinton. He said they voted after waiting about an hour for a sheriff's deputy to deliver ballots. Wells estimated 40 or 45 ballots arrived while about 75 people were waiting — and this was hours before polls closed.

"It's frustrating and it sort of makes you feel like something was being rigged or something," Wells, who is Black, said Wednesday.

An employee in the Hinds County election commissioners' office told The Associated Press that commissioners were not available for interviews Wednesday. All five Hinds County supervisors are Black and Democratic, as are all five of the county's election commissioners.

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Hinds County administrator Kenny Wayne Jones said money should not have been the reason for a ballot shortage.

"The election commission had all of the funding to do the election and order all the ballots they needed to order," Jones said Wednesday.

As ballots ran short, groups filed two lawsuits to try to give people more time to vote Tuesday night. One was filed by the nonpartisan group Mississippi Votes, and the Mississippi Republican Party initially supported it. The other was filed by the Mississippi Democratic Party.

In the Democrats' lawsuit, a judge ordered all Hinds County polling places to remain open one extra hour, until 8 p.m. CST. In the other lawsuit, another judge said specific precincts would need to remain open until

every voter in line at 7 p.m. had a chance to cast a ballot — something that was already required at precincts statewide.

Wu filed suit on behalf of Mississippi Votes. She said several groups worked together on election observation to protect voters' rights in Hinds County. The groups included Mississippi Votes, Poor People's Campaign, Legal Defense Fund and Mississippi Center for Justice.



Wu said the Mississippi Center for Justice, which focuses on issues of disproportionate disenfranchisement of Black residents, did not check the demographics of the precincts that ran out of ballots to see whether they were majority-Black, majority-white or evenly split.

She said small batches of ballots were delivered to precincts — not enough for the need.

“They weren't actually addressing and fixing the problem,” Wu said. “There were just Band-Aids throughout the day.”

Circuit Clerk Zack Wallace, the top elections official in Hinds County, said his office started receiving calls about ballot shortages Tuesday afternoon. He said he made a frantic trip to an office supply store as election commissioners scrambled to print more ballots and voters waited.

Secretary of State Michael Watson said one Hinds County precinct opened 15 minutes late, nine ran out of ballots and one conducted emergency balloting for an undisclosed amount of time.



One precinct in Clinton had 100 people in line but only 14 ballots available at 6:45 p.m., while another ran out of ballots three times but only received 100 more each time, according to the court filing by Mississippi Votes.

One precinct in nearby Byram had no ballots for two hours while a second had just 25 to 30 ballots and a long line of voters, the group said. A third location ran out of ballots and poll workers told people to leave because the precinct would not receive more ballots and the workers would not allow voting by affidavit ballot, according to the filing.

Wells said election officials should have expected a large turnout because of the governor's race.

Hannah Hoang, 25, a college student, said she was busy Tuesday and went to vote just before the usual poll-closing time of 7 p.m. She said her watch showed 6:58 p.m. when she arrived at the Fondren Presbyterian Church precinct in Jackson, but poll workers showed her a clock that showed 7:02 p.m. She said they told her she had arrived too late.

Hoang said she knew about the court order requiring polls to remain open until 8 p.m., but she left because the poll workers would not let her vote. She said she went home and called a voter-protection hotline, and a person told her she still had the right to cast a ballot.

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She said her precinct was locked when she returned, and she was directed to go to a precinct in another church across the street. That one was open, and Hoang said she voted by affidavit ballot.

Wallace said some polling locations requested as many as 400-500 ballots at a time, he said. But by the time the ballots were delivered, precincts needed more. Eventually, Wallace's printing machine ran out of ink.

"I went to Office Depot, but they didn't have toner cartridges, and we weren't able to print the ballots," Wallace said Wednesday.

Workers ended up making copies of multiple different types of paper ballots.

Wallace said he was busy Tuesday night and did not have time to check how many precincts violated the court order to remain open late.

Voting rights activists plan to meet next week to discuss legal recourse around restoring fair access to ballots, said Debbie Pantenburg, spokesperson for the nonpartisan League of Women Voters of Mississippi.

"Our membership is outraged that the lack of ballots happened in a historically underrepresented region of our state," Pantenburg said.

She said the league wants Watson to investigate and publish a report detailing how the problems happened.

The secretary of state's office can randomly audit election results but does not have the authority to investigate how local officials conduct elections, said office spokesperson Elizabeth Holbert Jonson.

"Ultimately, the Election Commission must answer for what they did/didn't do," Jonson said. "At the end of the day, outside of any criminal activity, their constituents are the only ones who can hold them accountable."

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Alexander reported from Washington, D.C.

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The Associated Press coverage of race and voting receives support from the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation. See more about AP's democracy initiative [here](#). The AP is solely responsible for all content.



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